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SEE "VOYAGE OF THE BRIGANTINE *YANKEE*" FRIDAY, FEB. 11, ON CBS TV (page 265A)

THE JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY WASHINGTON, D. C.

What was a woman doing there?

A RAINBOW decorated the western sky that early morning of November 4—the second day of Operation Black Ferret. Action began at 0745 when American Marines moved toward a cane field surrounding a village held by the Viet Cong near Chu Lai, South Viet Nam.

A foot brushed a concealed nylon fishing line, a booby trap roared, and shrapnel shredded the damp foliage, felling six Marines and a lady from Milwaukee, Georgette Louise ("Dickey") Chapelle. She died moments later, half a world from home.

What, you might ask, was she doing there? Dickey, a veteran war correspondent, had asked that same question in her autobiography, *What's a Woman Doing Here?* Her mother had taught her that "violence in any form is unthinkable." But she came to believe we could have peace only by being strong.

She became a correspondent in World War II to be near her husband, Navy photographer Anthony Chapelle. Perhaps it was the shock of photographing the death and horror of Iwo Jima and Okinawa that led her to dedicate her life to "telling the folks back home" how cruel war can be. Almost a quarter of a century later, her byline now famous, this remarkable woman is mourned in a dozen languages.

Because I knew and loved Dickey from working beside her in Cuba, Viet Nam, northeast India, and Ladakh, word of her death shocked and sorrowed me—but it did not surprise. Dickey and danger were never far apart.

The evening before her death, she dug her own foxhole and huddled under a poncho as a light rain fell through the glare of aerial flares. Though I wasn't there, I'm sure she opened her breakfast of cold C-rations with the Swiss Army knife she always carried.

Staff Sergeant Albert P. Miville told me later what had happened next.

"She asked if she could go with us. I said, 'Sure, Dickey, fall in behind me.' Five seconds later she was hit. I was only a step away. Some brush saved me. I yelled for a corpsman. He looked at her and told me, 'Sergeant, there is nothing I can do.' "

The sounds of the violence she had been raised to abhor became the siren song that lured Dickey to every scene of political mayhem since World War II: Korea, Cuba, Quemoy, India, Algeria, Lebanon, Laos, Viet Nam, and the Dominican Republic. While helping smuggle penicillin to Hungarian Freedom Fighters, Dickey was captured and spent six weeks in solitary confinement, with terrifying interrogations, before the United States consul was able to free her. "Thank God I'm an American," she said.

One recent winter Dickey lived in Florida near Cuban exiles. She stored their nitroglycerin in her icebox. Her brother, Professor Robert Meyer, didn't approve.

"But I sent her two Du Pont handbooks on high explosives," he told me. "I thought if she was going to be fooling with the stuff, she should know what she was doing."

Personal integrity forced Dickey to write only stories she had "eyeballed"—to use her phrase. Official government handouts, complained Dickey, "have all the authenticity of patent-medicine ads."

From 1935 when, at age 16, she entered Massachusetts Institute of Technology on a scholarship, Dickey became part of a man's world. She married at 22 and then became a pilot, a parachutist, and a combat photographer. Between wars, Dickey and her husband covered the work of a dozen relief agencies over the world. They reported in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC on locust plagues in Iraq (April, 1953) and village life in India (April, 1956).

To her death, Dickey and Tony remained friends, though their marriage was dissolved in 1956. A lone red rose at her gravesite in Milwaukee carried the one word "Tony." Nearby was a bouquet, also of roses, from the Hungarian Freedom Fighters.

Never did Dickey tolerate favors in the field because of her sex. She hid her figure in loose khakis and bandoliers of cameras and film cans. Her long blonde hair, rolled into a bun, nestled in a floppy Australian bush hat. Makeup was not part of her field kit.

In 1962, after five weeks with the Indian Army on the Chinese front, Dickey and I were flown directly to Calcutta, still in field gear. She excused herself at the airport, but returned almost immediately, laughing as she told me, in her gravelly, drill-sergeant voice, how successful her disguise had been: "I just got thrown out of the ladies' room."

In the field her only jewelry was the military insignia presented to her by fighting units. She fell wearing the globe and anchor of the Marine Corps Commandant, Gen. Wallace M. Greene, Jr., who took the insignia from his own uniform and gave it to Dickey before her departure for Viet Nam last fall.

To keep in condition and not be a burden on the men she photographed and wrote about, Dickey ran two miles a day when in New York between assignments.

In a lecture to Midwestern high-school students, she accused them of being "baby-soft teen-agers whose idea of exercise is to switch channels on the idiot box. . . ." Two boys challenged her to a 25-mile hike the next day.

"You know," she reported, "those kids were delighted when we finished. I knew I could do it, but they weren't sure they could."

Of her many honors, I suppose Dickey most treasured the Overseas Press Club's award for "reporting requiring exceptional courage and enterprise." When she wasn't with her adopted military families, she worked for the club, serving on its Board of Governors.

Some who knew Dickey were ill at ease in the presence of her nervously loud voice and exuberant manner. But these characteristics stemmed from an enviable enthusiasm for life, and a dynamic mind and heart. Dickey found an identity and purpose in life we all envied. It freed her of inhibitions and fears.

War reporter Dickey Chapelle, born Georgette Louise Meyer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 14, 1918, became the first American woman correspondent to die in action when she fell in South Viet Nam on November 4, 1965. Dickey was not on assignment for the GEOGRAPHIC when killed, but had been a contributor since 1953, and the article that follows was awaiting publication. Here, in the field in Viet Nam, she wears insignia earned by jumping into battle with U. S. and Vietnamese paratroopers.

She knew the odds against a moth that flies too close to the flame, but for years she beat those odds. She lived the hundreds of lives of the men she wrote about and photographed. Life was precious to her; her own was taken too soon. But she had used it well.

As a free lance writer-photographer, she had gone often to Viet Nam. Now, in the pages that follow, we present the last article for the GEOGRAPHIC by the courageous lady who always went where the action was.

W. E. GARRETT
Assistant Illustrations Editor

WATER WAR IN VIET NAM

Article and photographs by DICKEY CHAPELLE

"AS SOON AS THE LIGHT GOES, so will our patrols." In the tropical twilight, the words sounded softly at my ear.

Lt. Harold Dale Meyerkord, United States Navy, was too professional a fighting man to dramatize his statement. But it was enough to disquiet me, to remind me that today we had already buried a comrade, exchanged fire with Viet Cong, and twice set out fruitless ambushes.

"We" meant River Assault Group 23, one of the Vietnamese Navy's daring gunboat forces. Each group, known for its initials as a RAG, operates a miniature fleet of shallow-draft patrol craft.

FLAMING INFERNO, *ignited by a South Vietnamese patrol, flushes Viet Cong from a hut. "Night fighting is sudden, vicious, deadly," wrote combat correspondent Chapelle. During this action she crouched behind barbed wire on the bank of a canal, one in a maze of Mekong Delta waterways patrolled by River Assault Groups.*

EKTACHROME © N.G.S.

Each is commanded by a Vietnamese lieutenant and advised by an American naval officer—in this case, Lieutenant Meyerkord.

The RAG forces constitute the military presence of South Viet Nam on thousands of miles of waterway spanning the vast delta region of Indochina's Mekong River (map, page 281). Together with militia on fixed posts and infantry flown into the area, the little boats are trying to keep for the free world the coveted rice bowl of Southeast Asia.

One RAG Patrols Three Provinces

The delta is as rich in people as in rice: Five million of the 15,700,000 South Vietnamese live here. I had waded its fields three years before, photographing Vietnamese paratroopers and marines in action.* Water-borne forces were also fighting here, and now I'd come back to witness their operations. One of these, the Vietnamese Navy's so-called junk fleet, patrolled the coasts of the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam. The river gunboat groups, the RAG's, operated across the broad flood region between the two coasts.

RAG 23 was responsible for safeguarding three of the 13 delta provinces—Vinh Long, Vinh Binh, and Kien Hoa. These are crisscrossed everywhere by majestic rivers, meandering streams, straight canals. The way of travel and even the way of life here is water-borne, aboard sampans and junks. Most people rarely see or use the few highways.

On this tense twilight we were in the heart of the delta, some 20 miles south of our RAG's home base at the provincial capital of Vinh Long, and more than 75 miles southwest of Saigon. We had swept

*Dickey Chapelle's first-person account of the grim and gallant "Helicopter War in South Viet Nam" appeared in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC in November, 1962. Continuing to risk her life in combat, she took part in December, 1964, in the river and coast patrols she describes here. Since then American commitment to the Viet Nam struggle has increased markedly, and many more U. S. Navy and Coast Guard men are fighting side by side with Vietnamese water-borne forces against the Communists.

Packaged death—a Viet Cong mine—may lurk under any water weed. Here a canal's surface erupts, but harmlessly, as South Vietnamese crewmen of River Assault Group (RAG) 23 set off a charge to detonate hidden mines. A few hours earlier, a mine destroyed a gunboat and killed two men. Seven assault groups, each with 19 boats of various types, combat the Viet Cong in thousands of miles of river and canal lacing the vast rice bowl known as the Mekong Delta.

"**In this deadly game** of hide-and-seek . . . [you] feel joy at simple survival," wrote one who did not survive—Dickey Chapelle. Another who gave his life, United States Navy Lt. Harold Dale Meyerkord, here returns VC fire with an automatic rifle from the deck of his command boat.

Ramming the canal bank, gunboats land South Vietnamese infantrymen to battle a Viet Cong detachment. Red-scarfed fighters of the Popular Force (below) embark for a foray. This barefoot, lightly armed group functions much like a volunteer fire company in the United States. Farmers and merchants by profession, its members go into action only when the enemy threatens their villages.

down the Mang Thu River the previous night to aid an embattled district headquarters, Cai Nhum. The Viet Cong had broken off their assault as we arrived.

But neither we nor the other Vietnamese forces here then were winning. For months Viet Cong strength had been outgrowing ours. And turmoil in Saigon was sapping the confidence of the fighting men.*

I could not think of the canal banks beside us as details on the map of the free world. Instead, like the lieutenant and the RAG sailors, I considered them suspect places from which at any time, without warning, we might be shot at. My misgivings applied particularly to the American beside me.

The Viet Cong were shifting their priority target from Vietnamese to Americans. A few days earlier I had learned just how grimly successful the drive to kill Americans had been in this province. Of 40-odd American military men in Vinh Long—naval and infantry advisers, helicopter pilots, supply and maintenance experts—the enemy had killed or wounded 18 in the field and hit one, with a grenade, in his shower. The casualty rate for this single group of Americans was running at more than 40 percent.

Viet Cong Rule by Kidnaping or Killing Anti-Communist Leaders

True, this was not the kind of big action in which countries crumble overnight. But the Viet Cong tactic of kidnaping or killing local anti-Red leaders, now openly aimed at Americans, was as deadly as any tactic in any war we had ever fought.

Perhaps that was why the surviving Americans were so determinedly cheerful, why they so often joked about themselves. For example, Lieutenant Meyerkord's radio code name always drew a chuckle. It was "Hornblower," after the spirited hero of C. S. Forester's novels.

Now, telling me about the patrols, he held his chin pugnaciously high. I tried to imitate his discipline, to mask what I, too, felt. I fixed my eyes on the low silhouette of huts and bushes marking the canal bank beyond the rail of our 60-foot command gunboat.

Despite myself, I tried to slow the setting sun, to hold back the dusk now purpling the muddy fields and so delay the patrols. But I knew better than that. Their purpose was to safeguard our gunboats from mines. Unless our little landing teams did go, there was a

*See "Saigon: Eye of the Storm," by Peter T. White, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, June, 1965.

good chance that more of RAG 23 might be destroyed. Its survivors might once again fish from the turbid water more bodies like the one retrieved earlier in the day—a RAG gunner killed by a Viet Cong mine at the canal junction where we were now anchored.

The mine had been no crude gadget, but an electrically fired device big enough to shear off the heavy bow of the 56-foot launch and kill two of the crew.

A furtive villager had crept aboard our boat to report seven more mines in position in the 300 yards of canal behind us, rigged to wreck us as we returned after arranging the burial. If true, that meant there were at least seven Viet Cong hidden on the canal bank at this moment, one to detonate each mine, together with an ambushing force.

Our RAG commander, Vietnamese Navy Lt. Nguyen Van Hoa, briefed the little landing force, sending his instructions in shrill whispers over an American field radio.

Half the men, under a veteran Vietnamese officer, were to scour the east canal bank for the mines' detonating wires. The other half, under a Vietnamese ensign, were to patrol the west bank with Lieutenant Meyerkord. If either patrol force found a target too big to handle, the boats would come up to help. One comfort was the firepower of the RAG—20-mm. and 40-mm. cannon, .30- and .50-caliber machine guns, even an old 81-mm. mortar.

Isolation Favors the Viet Cong

Still, it would be a nervous business, with the odds favoring the enemy. Vinh Long Province, like the rest of the delta, had never been truly a part of any Indochinese state.

Here Khmer control ebbed centuries ago. The French, a generation back, sometimes taxed, but never ruled. Before River Assault Group 23 appeared, many villagers had not seen a representative of Saigon since the 1950's. Local warlords, river pirates, and now the Viet Cong had installed themselves without hindrance from any central government.

For two small bands of government troops to try to make their way in darkness, for hundreds of yards past houses and fields and jungle familiar to the enemy, was an act of daring. And an act of necessity.

Lieutenant Hoa, slight and erect, summed it up in his precise English: "Now that we have lost one boat, I could not tell my conscience or my admiral that I had sailed others into the same trap. The patrols will go first, the boats will follow."

I watched Lieutenant Meyerkord count ammunition clips into his pockets. Yet somehow it seemed unreal that I was going with him, and was slipping extra clips into my own pocket.

The war in Viet Nam marked the first time in more than twenty years as a war correspondent that I had carried a weapon in the course of my work. I'd begun it at the urging of the men I photographed, who reminded me that civilians were treated as spies when captured by the Viet Cong. Now, like most reporters covering combat operations in Viet Nam, I went armed.

Tense Patrol Begins With a Jest

"Where do you want to walk on this hike?" Lieutenant Meyerkord asked.

"Right behind you—you have the broadest shoulders, so you make the best bullet stop." I tried to make it sound light, but the words rang shrill.

The lieutenant abruptly dropped his stern-faced pose. With his normal gaiety he said, "Never thought I'd see the day when I'd have a *woman* behind me with a loaded carbine. Fire it one shot at a time, will you?"

I started to say I wasn't planning to fire it at all, but I started to chuckle instead. The lieutenant laughed frankly at his own joke. The Vietnamese sailors around us, caressing their own guns, laughed with him as if they'd understood.

"Nothing like something funny to settle them down, is there?" murmured the lieutenant fondly.

The first man climbed up to the bow where it pressed into the bank, jumped down, and disappeared. A second followed. The slight figure of the ensign disappeared next. Then it was Lieutenant Meyerkord's turn. When I reached the bow, the last sunset glow glinted on the mud surface as I jumped.

As I fell into the hypnotic rhythm of the patrol—we were moving between trees and

In a moment of serenity, while tides of terror rise and fall around them, Vietnamese youngsters play in a sampan. Strife seems far away; yet the deadly war inflicted upon the country by the Communists may destroy their village and snuff out their lives at any time. For the future of innocents like these, Americans fight and die in Southeast Asia.

KATACHROME BY DICKEY CHAPELLE © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

cane fields, stepping high so we would not trip and clatter on the uneven ground—I was obsessed by a question that had plagued me on other walks in other wars: Why?

Why was it that humans still got along so badly that conflicts were settled like this, by young men betting their lives at hide-and-seek? Did I truly think I could, with the camera around my neck, help end the need for the carbine on my shoulder? Did I think I could make plain how warring really was, how quickly the cutting edge of fear excised every human virtue, leaving only the need to live? Here, now, the supreme virtue was the ability to shoot fast. Or first.

And why were Americans like Meyerkord here? They had brought all their expertise and dedication and raw nerve from the security of their home towns to the ultimate insecurity of guerrilla warfare as far from home as it was possible to go.* Was that the American idea of global leadership? I knew it was at least one American's idea—mine.

Lieutenant Meyerkord halted and gestured toward a dark mass on our left. It was a building too big for a house. I remembered something Lieutenant Hoa had told us: The earlier mine had been assembled in a little factory of some kind on the canal bank.

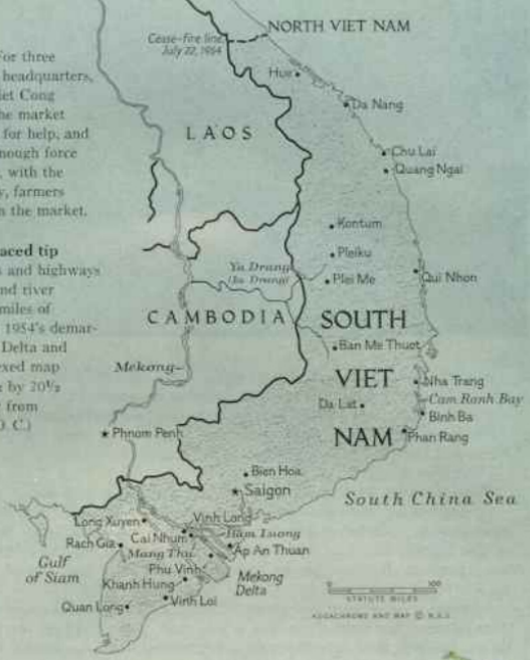
What we were passing was such a place, perhaps a sugar-cane mill. Half our file already had passed. No one had fallen out to search the building for Viet Cong. Was the little factory really deserted?

I heard the snick of the safety catch on Meyerkord's rifle; my carbine's safety clicked in turn. He led a squad from the rear of the line around the dark reed-wall structure.

*See "American Special Forces in Action in Viet Nam," by Howard Sochurek, GEOGRAPHIC, January, 1965

RAG rescues a village. For three days Cai Nhum, a district headquarters, lived in fear. Encircling Viet Cong lobbed in mortar shells. The market closed. Cai Nhum radioed for help, and RAG 23 responded with enough force to scatter the enemy. Now, with the protective fleet standing by, farmers in sampans come to reopen the market.

Ragged coast and river-laced tip of Viet Nam offer hideouts and highways for the Viet Cong. Junks and river boats patrol thousands of miles of shore and waterway, from 1954's demarcation line to the Mekong Delta and the Gulf of Siam. (An indexed map of Viet Nam in color, 11½ by 20½ inches, is available for 50¢ from the Society, Washington, D. C.)



Gagging smoke from a white phosphorus shell envelops an island of trees suspected of harboring the enemy. RAG troops advance through a field; moments later their gunboat will fire high-explosive shells into the woods.

Fallen comrade, a South Vietnamese rifleman killed by Viet Cong machine-gun fire, goes to his grave. Buddhist flags flutter above the mourners, who bear a model of a Vietnamese house and offerings of food, money, and candles for use by the departed in the hereafter. Even at a funeral service, armed guards (left) must protect the people.

EXTACHROME (BELOW) AND KODACHROME © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Starlight glinted on several huge metal pots. Then we could make out what might have been a press. The building seemed to have only three walls. The lieutenant decided it was empty and took up the patrol again.

He murmured, "They don't know they must search *every* building—we've just begun to train them for shore parties."

"Will they do whatever they see you do?"

"This is where we find out." He pointed to a row of huts ahead.

At each he led the men through the palm-sweating, knee-weakening, heart-stopping routine of stepping into the total blackness inside, finger on the trigger. The huts had been deserted—hastily, judging from the warm embers. By the time he approached the ninth hut, I knew the answer to my question.

Lieutenant Meyerkord had a team of Vietnamese searchers behind him. Two riflemen had figured out how it was done. They first kept the lieutenant covered; then they themselves began to search, passing the word to the men behind to cover them in turn.

"Now they *are* going through each hut," said the lieutenant, beaming.

Village Woman Warns of Viet Cong Hiding Place

The last hut was not deserted. We found the Vietnamese ensign in whispered conversation with a group in the entrance. He explained in fragments of English what a woman there had told him: No mine wires had been rigged from this side of the canal today. But the woman thought that some probably led from a house on the other side.

The lieutenant offered the woman a wad of currency. Vehemently she refused. He chuckled as he came back to the path. "Even in the Viet Cong's territory, not everyone hates the American adviser."

As we walked on, it grew terribly still. Or maybe it only seemed quiet in retrospect because of what came afterward—the sudden crash and chop of machine-gun fire.

But we were not the targets.

Crouched, we could see through a screen of grass that our patrol across the canal was firing at a hut from which streaks of tracer came at them. The sound echoed in short professional bursts, stuttering against a counterpoint of single shots. Then there were too many shots to count. Finally a finger of flame ran up one wall and turned to follow the roof line. The hut burst into flame. The firing stopped.

By the light of the burning hut, we took stock of our position. There was a barrier of looped barbed wire a little way up the canal bank; soon we were crowded behind it (pages 272-3). The Vietnamese ensign squatted to the lieutenant's left; I sat on my heels to his right. A soldier from the rear guard ran up, bringing word that the lady in the last house said there

were 30 Viet Cong in a cane field at our back.

"If they charge through the cane, we'll hear them in time," the lieutenant said. "But if they set up a machine gun and sweep their fire. . . ." He looked up and down the line of crouched figures.

I knew what he meant; we ought not to be huddled where one long burst could hit most of us. Reluctantly I moved back a few yards. Immediately three Vietnamese riflemen filled the space between us. They, too, wanted to be warmed by Dale Meyerkord's assurance.

Patrol Cannot Radio Its Danger

Now I could hear the ensign whispering frantically to his radioman. He seemed to be asking whether anyone remembered the radio frequency of the boats. No one replied.

This was not a simple matter, like remembering one's telephone number. The Viet Cong used captured American radios and usually listened in. So new channels were chosen by the Vietnamese just before each operation and confided only to its commanders. Somehow, nobody tonight had noted the frequency on which the boats would be listening for us.

A new fear gripped me. The RAG commander would know from the firing that there were Viet Cong about, and he might decide to move in, guns blazing at the area from which the enemy had fired on the other patrol. The canal curved gently here; this meant we were now halted close to what could become the boat's line of fire. Lacking radio contact, we could not tell the commander that. Would he guess in time?

With all the resignation I could summon, I rolled half to my knees and tried to recheck camera settings by feel. The next sound I heard was what I wanted most to hear: approaching boat engines. Just engines, not guns. The Vietnamese skipper had concluded correctly, from the end of the firing and the dying hut blaze, that no Viet Cong remained to detonate mines here. In ten minutes he had located and picked up the patrol on the far bank and our own.

We found the skipper studying maps under a flashlight aboard the command boat. The

Metallic eagle lifts a wounded brother high above the fertile rice fields of the Mekong Delta. Pilots of the twin-engine helicopters refer to themselves as a "road-service company," but their job of rescuing smaller choppers downed by the enemy brings them under fire on nine out of ten missions.

KODACHROME © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

KODACHROME BY DICKEY CHAPELLE © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Death rides their shoulders; dawn calls them to duty. South Vietnamese marines march past shell-tattered trees in an eternal silhouette of war, here reflected in the water of a rice field.

light reflected on his composed, ivory-skinned face; he did not look his age, which I knew to be 30.

"Our landing party must have driven the enemy away, carrying their mines," he told Meyerkord. "Since they did not keep firing, it must have been only a rear-guard action. *If*, of course, our information was correct in the first place. . . ." His voice trailed off.

Lieutenant Meyerkord had regained his usual ebullience. He grinned. "Well, as the newspapers tell us, it's a frustrating war."

Junk Navy Creates Its Own Legends

How to deploy small forces over large areas is the eternal problem of the Viet Nam war. It is true of the RAG's and equally of the Hai Thuyen, the armed junks guarding 1,200 miles of seacoast against the infiltration of men and guns from North Viet Nam. Some 500 little boats, operating out of a score of bases, must police tens of thousands of boat movements and check the identity of a million people afloat every year.

Since 1960, the junk force has spawned almost as many legends as it has missions. I had heard that every junk-force sailor could sail and fight expertly, that each was tattooed with his oath to kill Communists (page 288) —and hence would be shot if captured—and that each wore only the civilian garb of black pajamas on both land and sea.

The last tale, I quickly learned, was no longer so. But after several weeks with the "junkies," I came to accept all the other stories. Later I retold them myself, proudly wearing the force's unique silver twin-sail insignia. But the junkies had not let me wear it till I had been shot at with them several times.

When I first joined them, such an experience did not seem very probable.

"We just don't come under fire every day, as we used to," was the first thing told me by Lt. James Monroe Vincent, USN. I was unpacking cameras in a reed building at the junk-force base near Ap An Thuan village, at the mouth of the Ham Luong River some 60 miles south of Saigon.

The sturdy lieutenant sat cross-legged on the bare wooden boards he used for a bed. He was one of four Americans serving on roving duty to all the junk divisions of the Third Coastal District, Vietnamese Navy. (The South Viet Nam coastline is divided into four such districts, roughly matching the corps areas of the army.)

My briefing by Lieutenant Vincent ended with a characteristic understatement: "The junk divisions' function simply is to check every coastal boat that comes or goes, to be sure it's not serving the Viet Cong. We try not to do any more fighting on land. All those stories about land raids we've made—sure, a lot of them are true, but we made them only to secure our own bases."

He pulled out a well-creased map. The junk bases nearby all lay at the eastern edge of the delta, an area traditionally under Viet Cong control. Within a day's walk of where we sat, it was believed, enemy units were so deeply entrenched as to operate a rest camp, a hospital, and an officer training center.

"I know they're there," Lieutenant Vincent said. "Every time we sail past those beaches, somebody shoots at us."

He explained that neither type of operating junk—a motorized 50-footer and a motor-sailer 45 feet long—carried any armor plate. He finished generously, "To take pictures, you can sit anywhere you like. There's no safe spot aboard, anyhow."

On my first few patrols, there were no bullets. Our most hazardous mission, it seemed, was our daily showing of the flag in Ap An Thuan village, whose huts came up almost to the earth wall of the base. The base had been situated here because of the proximity of the village market and its food supply.

Viet Cong Set a Trap for Americans

One morning an informant brought word that two Viet Cong agents had been planted in the village to kill the American advisers at the junk base, Lieutenant Vincent and Chief Gunner's Mate Edmund Canby. The VC were not bluffing with such threats. A few months earlier, a mine detonated at the village gate had missed other Americans for whom it was intended, but it had blown legs off four junk sailors who had come in their place.

Also while I was there, Ap An Thuan faced another threat: mortar fire at night. No artillery is more dreaded, for a mortar shell—which can kill up to 40 yards from point of

SAILOR OF THE JUNK FORCE *wears the Vietnamese words for "Kill Communists!" tattooed over his heart. With his comrades, he cruises the coast in these light, fast-sailing vessels. The armada's goal: to deny the Viet Cong use of the sea as a supply route. Needing no fuel, the craft circle offshore near Binh Ba. If they spy suspicious traffic, they radio to better-armed motorized junks. Navy destroyer escorts and Coast Guard cutters from the United States recently reinforced the fleet.*

impact and wound much farther away—gives no warning. It can easily be lobbed over earth walls like those around the junk base.

"Now, if we're mortared, it may mean they'll try to overrun us," Lieutenant Vincent said. "We'll have to start shooting. The enemy uses the village as a shield. They know we try not to shoot toward the huts, no matter where their fire comes from. We'll have to go into the village again, and we don't want to spend the rest of our lives wondering who hit the women and children."

Three days later, I found out what he meant. The lesson came at high noon when, just back from a sea patrol aboard a motor junk, I had felt so secure that I'd taken off my boots and was wearing rubber shower shoes while sorting film. At first, I didn't believe my ears. I knew there were a dozen local militiamen in position nearby; could the stuttering shots I heard be the test-firing of their weapons? I went outside to hear better.

I had heard well enough. Those shots were fired from at least one American-made submachine gun and two automatic rifles, and the *zing-zing* of the bullets was coming in over our heads from the marketplace. The weapons obviously had been captured and were now being turned on us by the Viet Cong.

The incoming fire grew to a roar. I threw myself into a position on the base wall nearest the village, holding camera and carbine tightly because my hands suddenly were slippery. I saw that Lieutenant Vincent was in the next position along the earthwork. Here we were shielded—bullets don't go through earthworks. But I wondered: Since we had to turn back the Viet Cong somehow and they were shooting from inside the village, would our sailor-riflemen fire into the huts after all?

Junk Fleet Counterattacks—on Foot

Not for 12 minutes did the fire slacken. But I never saw one of our men aim toward a hut.

During a break in the firing, a sergeant ran in through the gate in our barbed wire. He said his dozen men had returned the fire from beyond the village until their ammunition ran out. He was telling Lieutenant Vincent and the officer commanding the junk division that we were still in deep trouble.

The enemy force—40 in all? More? He did not know. Still breathless, he told us three of his men were wounded.

EKTACHROME (OPPOSITE) AND KODACHROME © N.G.S.

Silently slipping from dark-sailed junks, Vietnamese sailors train near Cam Ranh Bay. Later the author joined a real assault in Phuoc Tuy Province, where a Viet Cong contingent had wiped out half of another battalion.

Baleful eye on the bow wards off demons, but the .30-caliber machine gun proves more effective against the VC. American naval architects helped design this command craft, one of 250 boats built in Viet Nam for the junk force.

Hope in a box: Hungry for learning, Vietnamese youngsters solemnly accept CARE kits containing notebooks, pencils, and rulers from the hands of a U. S. Strike Force officer in Kien Phong Province. American infantryman at Cai Nhum (right) shows a mother with a sick—and scared—child how to use a medicine dropper. Both scenes illustrate a conviction of Dickey Chapelle's. "Perhaps someday," she wrote, "compassion as an infantry tactic will be taught to every American soldier. He will still need to know his rifle number, his general's name, and how to kill. . . . And, when he kills, he will ask . . . if it is necessary. It will be that last reflex—the wondering why, the compassion for others . . . that may someday be America's unique contribution to the history of force."

EKTACHROME (OPPOSITE) AND KODACHROME © N.G.S.

I don't remember that anybody used the word counterattack. But a few minutes later I was moving through the empty market square, running to keep up with the figures around me. Ahead was the junk division's junior officer, Thanh Phu, carrying a grenade launcher; Lieutenant Vincent with an automatic carbine; and a dozen others. I looked back and saw perhaps 40 more. Our base was emptying itself of every able-bodied man.

The two lieutenants, one American and the other Vietnamese, led us through a paddy field, across a patch of jungle, and up a steep sand hill. I could see now that we were heading toward the next village, from which our patrol junks often were fired on. Past another high ridge, I heard firing on the left—the inland side. At first I was not sure it was incoming, but Lieutenant Vincent was wiser; when I squinted into my camera's view finder, he grunted, "Don't stop for any reason on this high ground. You'll be silhouetted against the sky. An easy target."

"I won't," I assured him fervently, and ran on.

Fleeing Enemy Drops List of Weapons

The firing sputtered out, and I found myself in a little glade just behind the Vietnamese lieutenant. He was bending over to pick up some things the Viet Cong obviously had dropped in haste. They proved our run in the sun had not been in vain.

The lieutenant was holding a fistful of enemy papers and insignia. One neat, ink-written notebook page listed the weapons of our attackers, including captured American-made ones. Also in the glade were many empty cartridges and a few unfired ones which I pocketed. They proved to be Chinese.

Then I was running again over the uneven ground, toward

the first huts of the village. Firing burst out to our right. I could see several of our men, small in the distance, shooting deliberately. I fixed my eyes on the huts and prayed our momentum would not carry us—barely a reinforced platoon—straight into a whole Viet Cong village.

Lieutenant Vincent threw back over his shoulder at me, "How many clips you got? I only have ten." I wondered what kind of battle he expected; his clips held 180 rounds.

"I've got four," I replied. "But can't they support us from the base with the big mortar?"

"Not much help if this thing goes hand to hand," he answered. "You know, we can be cut off from our base, too, just as we've been trying to cut off the VC. Though I think they've gotten clean away."

Just then the Vietnamese officer seemed to realize how far we had charged. He waved

"He was a *man*," said Dickey Chapelle of Lieutenant Meyerkord (above). It was her highest accolade. Automatic rifle in hand, Meyerkord directs fire from his gunboat. "Doughty but aging," the author described this craft, called FOM after the initials of the former French colonial administration in Viet Nam. Lightly armored, it carries one turret-mounted .50-caliber machine gun and three of .30 caliber.

EKTACHROME (RIGHT) AND KODACHROME BY DICKEY CHAPELLE © N.G.S.

in all his men except two flanking parties.

One junk sailor said he had been fired on from an adjoining hut. A petty officer and four riflemen searched the building and came out carrying a shiny brass Viet Cong grenade, its casing obviously cast from a mold of an old U. S. grenade. The sailors at first proposed to set fire to the house. But a militiaman objected that he had a friend who lived in the neighboring reed house, and if one burned, the second would, too.

Lieutenant Phu ordered us to start back on a cart trail circling toward the beach. Every 20 yards or so along its drainage ditches we saw a deep-dug rifleman's hole.

Lieutenant Vincent came alongside. "If they try to ambush us, you know enough not to jump into one of those holes, don't you?"

"Booby-trapped, maybe?"

"Good girl," he grunted, and again took his place in our rear guard, nearest the enemy.

His warning made me so sure we'd be ambushed that a sensation of relief flooded me when we reached Ap An Thuan. The deserted marketplace, bullet-crossed two hours before, now seemed as secure as the Pentagon.

A few minutes later, back inside the base, Lieutenant Vincent stared at my feet in their thonged rubber shower shoes.

"We must have covered five miles. Did you wear those foolish things all the way?" he asked incredulously.

"That's right," I answered. "You said there wouldn't be any more land operations—remember?"

We laughed too much at the joke, because it felt so good to laugh at all.

Laughter—and Death—on the Delta

But laughter seldom lasts long on the delta, where sailors fight a strange kind of war—as much on land as on the water.

Shortly after I returned home, there appeared on the casualty lists another name: Harold Dale Meyerkord. Audacious, ebullient Lieutenant Meyerkord of River Assault Group 23, once of St. Louis. Dale Meyerkord, husband, father, leader and teacher of men, dead of a bullet in the brain on a muddy canal 9,000 miles from Missouri.

"Great personal risk . . . was routine" for Lieutenant Meyerkord, Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze declares as he presents the Navy Cross—its highest decoration—to the officer's widow, the former Jane Schmidt. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harold E. Meyerkord of St. Louis, hold the Air Medal, also awarded the officer posthumously on November 9, 1965. Wounded from ambush, Lieutenant Meyerkord continued firing until a second shot killed him.